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PROPHETIC SPOKESMEN

Studies in the Twelve Minor Prophets

PROPHETIC SPOKESMEN

STUDIES IN
THE TWELVE MINOR PROPHETS

BY

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TO MY MOTHER.

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PROPHETIC SPOKESMEN.

I.

THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GENTLENESS.

I will be as the dew unto Israel.

—HOSEA xiv. 5.

A ministry such as that of Hosea, which extended over a period of sixty years, must have been subject to a good deal of light and shade. What interesting reminiscences he must have had of illustrious co-temporaries; men like Isaiah, Amos, Joel, Micah and Nahum; all of whom shone at one period or other during his long life. Palestine, which is about the size of Wales, consisted then of two kingdoms: the north and the south. Hosea was a native of the former, and exercised his ministry there. Outwardly that kingdom was prosperous, but morally it was rotten. The curse of that age was materialism. And there is a word that tolls like a knell through the chapters of this book, 'Israel hath forgotten his Maker.' The misery and poverty of the slaves and peasants was horrible; while the fictitious prosperity of the upper classes was characterized by senseless extravagance, impurity, and idola-

try. Even the religious teachers lived depraved lives; and bribery was so common that justice was often perverted.

All this lay heavily upon the heart of the prophet—a man with an extremely sensitive and delicate temperament. No wonder there is music, pathos, charm, and beauty in what he wrote. The book of Hosea might be described as one great burst of emotion. It is not the emotion that betrays shallowness, but depth; for he was driven down into the deepest problems of life. The book is the outcome of an intense inward conflict. We see in him a man agonizing for the rescue of his nation; a heart breaking for the sins of the people. His was not a calm, calculating, imperturbable nature, but impetuous and fiery. He does not always stop to think, or to reason things out. He sways like a pendulum from one extreme to another: one moment all blazing indignation at the people's blindness and madness and wickedness; the next moment yearning over them with that great tender heart of his, like a mother over her prodigal son who is whitening her hair and breaking her heart. Hosea and Amos began their ministry together, but they were as unlike as two men could be. Amos is all thought; Hosea is effervescent and sparkling.

Amos thunders out dread words of doom; Hosea is as tender and gentle as a woman.

The most original thing in his book, and that which constitutes his chief contribution to the religious thought of the world perhaps, is his conception of the relationship between God and His people. He believed that the bond that bound God to them was precisely similar to the sacred marriage bond of holy love. How came he to think this? It was the outcome of his own exceedingly bitter, pathetic, personal experience. In early manhood this high-souled prophet loved and wedded. And like other men, he dreamed of a happy home with the woman to whom his heart had gone out. And then a terrible disaster befel him. She proved unfaithful and forsook him. And perhaps we can imagine the agonies he passed through in his desolation. After a time he heard that Gomer his wife had been cast off by her lover, had sunk into wretched poverty, and had become a despised slave. And then his heart grew tender and pitiful; the old love awoke; and he decided to buy her back out of her degradation and misery. All this was heroic and splendid. But it started him thinking. If he could do that for the one he had loved, would not God do the same for His unfaithful

and sinning people? Had not God been a Husband to His people Israel? Could she who has gone away ever quite forget her first love? And will God's people ever quite forget all that He had been to them? Will not better thoughts and divine promptings come to them in their sin? And if the prophet could not leave his wife in the house of another, can God cease to care for His people Israel? It was some such reasoning that led up to the plaintive appeal, 'O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God for thou hast fallen by thy iniquity. Take with you words and turn to the Lord, say unto Him, take away all iniquity and receive us graciously.' What a miracle will happen if they do! 'I will heal their backsliding!' The very desire and tendency and inclination to sin shall be taken away. 'I will love them freely.' The past shall have no power to chill, or even to diminish in the smallest degree the divine love for them. We see that God is prepared to do more than they ask. Not merely to take away their iniquity, but to heal their backsliding. Not only to receive them graciously, but to love them with a love in which there is no tincture of reproach. The trembling sigh of their prayer shall bring down a whole heaven full of benediction. 'I will be as the dew unto

Israel!' What tenderness, what gentleness, what compassion, what forgiveness, what hope these words convey! We are familiar with the beneficent ministry of the dew. Its noiselessness. The way it loses itself in its gracious work of refreshing. How it sinks away into the heart of the rose and down among the roots of the grasses. There is nothing to show that it has been at work save the signs of revived life in nature. There is no ostentation. It hangs about the leaves, and on every blade of grass, and lies like a gem in the cup of the flower, as if nothing should escape its blessing. It gives itself with great glad lavish benevolence to every separate stalk and stem.

So God, instead of tearing down and rooting up, or coming in terrors and thunders, will be like the silent, gracious, gentle, hidden dew to the hardened and callous souls of His people, begetting in them a new tenderness, a wonderful softening, a gracious awakening for better things. And God's silent ministry will not be in vain. 'He shall blossom as the lily.' Out of the dry parched ground and from the withered root shall come the fair flower of loveliness. 'He shall cast forth his roots as Lebanon!' Beside purity and beauty, there shall be firmness, strength, stability.

Here we see the omnipotence of gentleness. It is said that there is sufficient electricity in a single dewdrop to shatter the dome of St. Paul's. But the dew, instead of shattering and destroying, performs its marvellous and effective ministry. And God can turn a wasted perverted life into a vision of beauty and strength. He can get right down to the very roots of our being and beget a new life by the magic of His divine tenderness. Who shall say what God cannot do in the heart of a man! for power itself has not one half the might of gentleness. If we really believed this, we should not so easily lose faith in men and women, as if they were God forsaken. To create a psychological atmosphere of despair does not help any one. If called upon to preach to an audience of human derelicts swept up from the streets after the public houses are closed, would not God want us to tell them of His great love and tenderness and forgiveness? What we need is more faith in the miracle of God's redemptive power; in the divine influences that are round about men; and in the life-giving touch of God. The message of this great saint of old is that God leaves no man to himself. And that our human love can help men to see and feel the love that is divine.

II.

THE GOSPEL THAT CHALLENGES DESPAIR.

And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.—JOEL ii. 25.

The prophecy of Joel was prompted by a terrible visitation at which 'all faces did gather blackness.' Considerably more than half the book is taken up with a graphic and moving description of a plague of locusts. So serious is it that it calls for a national humiliation before God. After they had passed over the land, what had been like a garden of Eden, resembled a desolate wilderness. They came in such dense masses and flew so closely together, that they obscured the sun's light. The noise of them was like the rushing of a mighty wind; and with their sawlike teeth they even barked the trees. The devastation they made not only brought misery to man and beast, but the daily service had to be abandoned through lack of the necessary material.

To the prophet this desolation is a parable of the spiritual condition of Israel. To us it is emblematical of the blight and devastation of sin darkening and rendering barren the years of our life. Perhaps there are not many who have escaped the locust swarm of evil. And if we had to apportion the blame, it would be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to determine the extent of human culpability, apart from the fault of environment and the accident of circumstances. Enough for us that human beings are overtaken, overshadowed, overpowered by evil, and their lives laid waste.

But can the lost years be retrieved? Can the ravages of sin be remedied? Is there a gospel of redemption? The answer of the cynic would be a curt, cruel, blunt negative. Any remission of the consequences of sin would be denied. Any hope held out to those who have 'gone under,' would be looked upon as false and misleading. Whether the victims were blameworthy, or only to be pitied, their fate is regarded as sealed.

With that judgement, however, we utterly disagree. It is admitted that no man bathes twice in the same wave, and that no one can live any moment twice over. But thickly as the locust swarm may have lain upon our past

years, and utterly as they may have laid waste much of our life, there is a gospel of self-recovery; because we believe in a God who comes right down to the things that trouble us most, our locust-eaten years; who knows the anguish and remorse that wrings the soul when we think of the things that might have been; and whose message is that He can do something with us in spite of the past.

The vision flung before us here is emancipation from the blight and destructiveness sin has wrought. That we can be as though the years of our past had not been ravaged. Moffatt's translation is, 'I will make up to you for the years that the locusts ate.' But no one must infer from this that it is a matter of indifference how a man misspends his youth, provided he reforms when he reaches manhood. There are things about a bad past that never can be remedied. Though the wound be healed, the scar remains. At the same time there is a very much bigger gospel than that of mere forgiveness. Lives blackened and rendered waste and sterile, can be restored by the power of God. And the restoration wrought by God in the redeemed soul is so wonderful, that it is difficult to define its limits.

What surprises confront us on the pages of

the gospels! We see Zacchæus, the hated tax-gatherer, making a vast surrender and proving himself to be a true son of Abraham. Mary Magdalene, a byword of society, is transformed into a saint of passionate devotion. Matthew leaves a sordid environment to become an apostle and write a gospel. Peter flings off his weakness and changes into the rock of the church. Even Iscariot, had he repented, might have redeemed his crime. In every life, however world-ridden and passion-drenched, there are mighty seeds of good. Every heart contains perfection's germ, says Shelley.

But not only has God power to restore poor, sin-blighted, humanity. There is the unquestionable ability within man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavour. It is a deep tragedy when a human being is too far gone to feel his degradation, because no one can be lost who is truly penitent. We have but to get down to the very feet of God, and into the deepest dust of soul anguish and contrition. Then it is that God takes hold of us, and we take hold of God, and we become omnipotent with His strength. The unpardonable folly is to sit still and give ourselves up to vain regret. There is no moral great-

ness that is not within reach of every one.

> The past is a story told—
> The future may be writ in gold.

And the one thing that can put us in possession of it, is true penitence of heart. For that this prophet pleads with passionate earnestness. He implores the priests, the ministers of the Lord, to weep between the porch and the altar, and to say, 'Spare Thy people, O Lord, and give not Thine heritage to reproach.' As if to suggest that the blunted moral sense of the people was due to the condoning of sin by those who were keepers of the public conscience. To the people his cry is, 'Rend your hearts, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God.' The prayers of others will be of little avail unless there is the most determined and desperate effort on our part. That which we are apt to harbour in our very bosom, must be ruthlessly cast out. The unclean, defiling thing must go. Our Lord insisted upon this same drastic treatment with the sin of the heart. It is the one thing with which there must be no compromise. And whatever may be the blandishments of evil, deep down in our inmost soul we feel that we were made for better things. The world may have its grip upon us, but still we hear higher voices.

We are not surprised that this book of prophecy closes with a vivid picture of the future glory of mankind. It is the logical conclusion that individual redemption will end eventually in universal restoration from the blight and waste of sin. The same power that can raise the individual, can lift the whole race. God swept away the locusts with a mighty wind and drowned them by myriads in the Red Sea waves. And will not the time come when human life will be rid of its devouring pests? And should we not view the world, not merely as it is, but as it can and will be in God's unconquerable purpose?

III.

THE GOSPEL FOR THE RESTLESS HEART.

Seek Him that maketh the Pleiades and Orion.—AMOS v. 8.

The utterances of inspired men seem to be for all time, like great art and the music of the great masters. Here is this prophet, Amos, who lived two thousand five hundred years ago, when Isaiah was a small boy learning his Hebrew alphabet. What a vastly different world that must have been! And yet men lived and loved and toiled and repented and speculated concerning the Hereafter then as we to-day. Amos belonged to the farming class, and lived in the village of Tekoa, twelve miles south of Jerusalem. His figures of speech are pastoral, and there is the odour of new mown hay, and the rumble of carts with sheaves in his book of prophecy.

This man of stuttering speech was of humble origin. He could not lay claim to aristocratic descent like Isaiah, or Ezekiel,

or Jeremiah. He was a man of the people, but he had force of character and native ability. An observant student of men and things he followed closely the trend of affairs, and the movements of his time. This self-taught man knew more astronomy than most townspeople of to-day. His ministry began when his country was spent-up with war. The land had been neglected because the men were wanted to fight. When they returned they were faced with unemployment and poverty. And there were profiteers in those days.

This prophet was no soothsayer who dealt in soporifics. Nine-tenths of his book is denunciation. Not a gloomy dean this time, but a gloomy prophet. He had the courage to speak the unpalatable and naked truth. You find him denouncing those who were mad to be rich, and all for the sake of ostentation; exposing the wicked senseless extravagance and luxury of the ruling classes, and rebuking their irreverence and callousness. His object was not to set class against class, as if one class had a monopoly of virtue and another a monopoly of vice. He was capable of saying very straight things to working men if they were slackers, and idled away their masters' time, and drank away their senses.

At the same time he was stern in his condemnation of the heartless oppression of the poor, and of all religious mummery. He does not spare the nations outside his own; two chapters are filled with his criticisms of their inhumanness. But four chapters are occupied with his strictures upon the wickedness and cruelty of his own people, rendered all the more revolting because of their despicable hypocrisy. Special offerings for the temple could not atone for fraud, deception, and oppression.

This man had his own idea of God. He did not believe in a cast-iron God, or one who delights in pitchforking people into infinite agony and eternal torment. He was equally far from believing in an imbecile God who is all indulgence and moral weakness. He believed in a God who demanded righteousness, and who could not tolerate insincerity. The little this man knew of astronomy seems to have helped him in forming his conception of the Supreme Being. The God of Amos was the God who made Pleiades and Orion. Pleiades, or The Seven Stars, are the sweet evangels of the Spring; Orion is the warning prophet of Winter. Pleiades are connected with all sweetness and joy; Orion is the herald of the tempest.

This prophet believed that right doing brings the summer of God into the soul; and wrong doing the withering blasts of wintry discontent and desolation. The God of Amos was righteous and yet merciful. And so throughout his prophecy, like a deep undertone, you hear the wail of the great heart of God to his sinning people: 'Seek ye Me, and ye shall live; seek good and the God of hosts shall be with you.'

One thing that is suggested by these words is that human life is not complete without God. At first this truth may sound strange and far away. It might require some little courage to proclaim it in the busy thoroughfares. How many are there who believe it? Can such a statement be defended? Taking a superficial view of life, people seem to get along fairly well without God But get beneath the surface, and what restlessness, what heart-ache, what bitter disappointment, what utter dissatisfaction with life as a whole! Get into the deeper region of human experience, and what hopelessness, what consciousness of failure, what appalling loneliness, what moral chaos!

If the Bible teaches anything it is that there is rest of soul for man in God unlike anything else on earth. The vast majority, how-

ever, do not believe it, or they ignore the greatest boon within their reach. Most people believe there is a God, but for vast numbers the name of God is the emptiest word in the language. Men do not even dream that satisfaction of soul lies in that direction. They imagine that money may bring them the desired happiness; or success, or fame, or some other will-o'-the-wisp. But neither rich people nor famous strike one as being particularly happy.

The restlessness of modern life is eloquent witness that man is feverishly seeking something he cannot find, and which only God can give. There is something within man akin to God which cannot be satisfied with aught else. In Shakespeare's 'As you like it,' the stricken deer deserted by its companions, crawled to the water's edge as though thirst were all its pain,—a picture of the inarticulate yearning of the human soul, heated and wounded in the chase. 'As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God.' That is true of every man if he did but know it. We are all children knocking at the gates of life and wanting something. That something is God.

But another truth emerges from this prophet's words and that is that God is ever

seeking His wayward, wandering children. How true is every word in that great poem by Francis Thompson, 'The Hound of Heaven'! How those strong feet have followed and followed each one of us down the years, 'with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, with deliberate speed and majestic instancy'! If there is a God of Pity we can understand His seeking us when we so wound and lacerate and exhaust ourselves in our frantic attempts to find something that will satisfy. Are we trying to elude and outwit the Divine Seeker and Lover of our soul?

Mankind might be divided into two classes: Those whose lives are wonderfuly serene, because they have the worshipping heart and live to love and serve the Holiest. And those whose lives are full of pathos and tragedy, because they have idolatrous hearts and worship idols. The idol may be money, or pleasure, or success, or some human love; it is all the same. There is nothing so ruinous as the riot of the restless affections. One idol after another is set up, is worshipped, is in turn dethroned. We have our idols, they pass away, are superseded, and the heart is emptier and more desolate than before. But let a man determine to be ruled by the Highest, to be true to his best thoughts of what he believes

God requires of him, and that man will find peace unto his soul.

God has been likened to a port landlocked on every side where no rasping withering winds can possibly invade. God the home of the soul! It is because God is our Father, and not a metaphysical abstraction, that He wants us as His children, and for our own sakes too. And the melancholy and tragedy of our life would end if we said, 'I will arise and go to my Father.' 'Seek Him that maketh the Pleiades and Orion.' 'Seek ye Me and ye shall live.' 'Come unto Me and I will give you rest.'

IV.

STANDING ALOOF.

In the day that thou stoodest aloof.
—OBADIAH i. 11.

The situation presented by the book of Obadiah is that of a dark hour, probably the darkest hour in Israel's history. City and temple had fallen, and the people had been carried away by their captors. Edom had viewed it all with superciliousness and contempt. The kingdom of Edom was situated to the south of Judah. These two nations were stubborn foes, with bitter memories and rival interests; and each tried to disinherit the other. The quarrel had existed for generations. Both nations were possessed by a strong sense of distinction from the rest of mankind, due to their common descent; for they can trace their lineage back to Jacob and Esau. Israel was conscious of a peculiar destiny not yet realized. Edom had this feeling of superiority, but with them it took the form of isolation and self sufficiency; priding themselves upon their large stores of wealth,

and reputation for worldly wisdom. The future did not concern them, and they felt no need of the Divine.

Of all the antipathies which the Jewish nation experienced, none was more bitter and more constant than that towards Edom. David had warred against them, and most of the prophets had cried for vengeance against them. Other enemies came and went, but Edom was always there 'and his anger did tear perpetually.' The two peoples scorned, hated, and scourged each other with a relentlessness that is almost without a parallel.

There was this small kingdom perched among crags and fastnesses almost unapproachable. Its purple mountains provide, so it is said, the finest rock scenery in the world. From Mount Hor, which is their summit, you look down upon a maze of mountains, cliffs, chasms, rocky shelves and strips of valley. On the east is the crested edge of a high, cold plateau, covered for the most part by stones, but with stretches of corn land and scattered woods. On the west spring walls of rock, steep and bare, from the yellow of the desert. The interior is reached by defiles so narrow that two horsemen may scarcely ride abreast, and the sun is shut out by the overhanging rocks. Eagles, hawks, and other

mountain birds fly screaming round the traveller. The villages have been likened to wild-fowls' nests, perched on high shelves of rock, or hidden away at the ends of the deep gorges. Besides the wheat lands on the eastern plateau, the wider defiles hold fertile fields, and terraces for the vine. Mount Esau is a well stocked, well watered country, full of food and lusty men, yet lifted so high and locked so fast by precipice and slippery mountain, that it calls for little trouble of defence.

But this isolated kingdom was as unneighbourly as it was ungetatable. Of all the peoples who could have helped the kingdom of Judah if it had been so disposed was this kingdom of Edom, yet it never lifted a finger. Edom was cold, proud, cynical, utterly satisfied with this world's goods; with no conscience, no faith in the future, no capacity for vision, dead to the unseen. We never hear in the Old Testament of the Edomite gods. It is never mentioned that Edom had a religion. The only contribution this small state ever made to the world, was the family of the Herods. And it has been said of the members of that family that they were clever, scheming, ruthless statesmen, as able as they were false and bitter, as shrewd in policy as they

were destitute of ideals. And when the Edomite Herod the Great, as king of the Jews, sought to kill the infant Christ, the envy and rancour of Edom culminated in that deadly blow aimed at the Lord's Messiah.

The book of Obadiah is wholly a message of doom upon Edom; the outpouring of a hot-blooded patriot in bitter resentment of their cruelty in a day of great tribulation. This book, the shortest in the Old Testament, is never quoted in the New Testament. We know little of the writer beyond his name, which means servant of Jehovah. Some scholars think that he prophesied about 845 B.C. If that is so, then he would be the first of the extant writing prophets. His style is blunt and soldier-like and full of rugged dramatic force. There are no flowery expressions or picturesque descriptions. He has been called the most purely nationalistic of the prophets, although the closing sentence of the book lifts him quite above Jewish nationalism; it is as universal in its ultimate scope as the prayer, 'Thy kingdom come.' His words are, 'And saviours shall come upon Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lord's.'

At this great distance it is difficult for us to understand the fierce, unsparing denuncia-

tions in this book. Before we pass judgement we need to know more of the greatness of the provocation. And it is impossible for us to enter into the sufferings of that martyrdom endured by God's people in all its blackness and seeming hopelessness. Here is a man who fought and suffered for the highest things, and in his darkest hours, is mocked by a people who have neither vision nor feeling. If we cannot fully vindicate, he at least claims our sympathy. But is this book only an outbreak of Israel's selfish patriotism? Can we believe that it was mere passion for revenge which inspired these few hot verses of Obadiah? Was it not for the sake of justice, mercy, and truth that its wrath is poured upon foes whose treachery and malice seek to make them impossible by destroying the one people on earth who then believed and lived for them?

The Edom denounced by this prophet represents in principle the perpetual war of proud, cold hearted, worldly wisdom against the kingdom of God. There are multitudes who stand aloof when by every consideration of common sense they should enlist in the great campaign for righteousness and peace. We have to face the dark and dismal tide of indifference; the indifference of those on the

one hand whose lot is so unfortunate that they care but little what happens to the nation, or the world; and on the other hand of those who are so comfortable that their higher aspirations are blunted, and their powers of service and sacrifice run low.

And yet if circumstances can speak, there rings out to-day a call which no man of good-will may dare to neglect. A thousand projects demand attention for the welfare of our human kind. If ever negligence was criminal in regard to the world's plight, it is criminal now. If we would not be guilty of treachery to humanity, must we not heed the call to help?

V.

HUMAN PREJUDICE AND DIVINE MERCY.

And the Lord said, 'Doest thou well to be angry?'—JONAH iv. 4.

No book in the Bible has given rise to more controversy than the book of Jonah. This is owing largely to the persistent attempt to interpret its contents literally. It is more rational, however, to regard it as a superb work of imagination with a sublime message; Nineveh standing for the heathen world, and Jonah, which means Dove, personifying the Jewish nation. It is one of the most powerful books ever written, although it contains less than two thousand words.

What led the author to produce this beautifull allegory? We know that the mission of the chosen people was to be a light to the Gentiles, to proclaim the knowledge of Jehovah, and to convert all nations to believe in the one true God. But after their return from

the Exile they seem to have lost that missionary ideal and become hard, narrow, exclusive, viewing the heathen peoples as an evil and hostile power whose just desert was to be wiped out. But one great soul in Judaism revolted against this flinty-heartedness that regarded the heathen as only so much fuel for the consuming wrath of Jehovah. That man was the author of this book, and in it he has registered his protest, very artistically but none the less powerfully. It is a call to Israel to accept their divinely-appointed mission of saving the Gentile world by the proclamation of the truth; and incidentally it is one of the greatest missionary appeals in the whole of the Bible.

With true artistic skill the book begins, as it ends, very abruptly. The opening sentence is, 'Go to Nineveh that great city and thunder in their ears that their wickedness is known to Me.' Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, and regarded as a monstrous embodiment of cruelty and violence, with a reputation stained with innumerable crimes against humanity. A most forbidding and hopeless mission field. What happens? Precisely what so often happens when a nation is urged to do a great and heroic thing—they evaded it. Jonah, who personifies them, is

represented as skulking away in an entirely opposite direction. This skilful touch shows what ludicrous conceptions even religious people can have of God. Jonah takes ship for Tarshish to escape from the presence of the Lord! As if we could get away from God by turning our backs on His commandments, or could escape trouble by refusing to be guided by the highest. The chosen people had reasons for not going to Nineveh and laying themselves out for further world-wide propaganda, but they were unworthy reasons; and God does not leave disobedient nations alone. The Jewish nation was tumbled up and down in a sea of tribulation until they came to a better mind. And after being in a veritable belly of hell, they came to see that there is something greater to live for than mere national self aggrandisement.

And so the command is repeated: 'Go to Nineveh that great city and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before Me.' This time Israel obeys. Then follows in most glowing colours a description of the success of that mission. But we need not take as literal the preaching of Jonah in the streets of Nineveh, his being summoned into the august presence of the great king, or the dramatic repentance of that monarch; nor

yet the storm that overtakes the chief actor in the story, and his being delivered from a watery grave by a great fish swallowing him. The author adopts this pictorial way to convey the truth that God cares for us, and keeps his hold upon us, even in our disobedience; that there is a love that will not let us go. If we never make shipweck it will not be because of our hold of Christ, but because of Christ's hold of us. And the description of the dramatic change that comes over that brutish world-power, is to teach that no nation is hopeless. Babylon is converted; Nineveh repents! The writer wants us to see what will happen when nations see the divine in each other, and seek each other's good. As long as they remain in clenched antagonism, flinging anathemas at one another, there can be no world peace.

Then we see the divinity in human nature in the delineation of those sailors. Is there not more of God than devil in all men? Here are crude, every day mortals who belonged to the heathen world, and yet what splendid fellows they were? How reluctant they are to take life; to cast Jonah overboard, even when in their superstition they regard him as the cause of the storm. And to save him they dig

their oars into the water and strain every nerve to get him to land, but without avail. And before they do cast him overboard, they pray to Jonah's God.

Is not this to emphasize the splendid moral qualities that exist in the heathen world? While the thoroughness of the repentance of the Ninevites is to indicate, perhaps, the readiness of the outside world to turn to Jehovah, when rightly approached. The humiliation of this proud nation before God is made to extend to their animals: the cattle are made to fast, and the horses and mules and camels and asses are covered with sackcloth. When do we find any such humiliation even among the Hebrews?

But now comes the surprise of the whole story. God's own people are chagrined and angry because Nineveh has repented, and divine mercy is going to spare them! Jonah, who stands for the Jewish people, is represented as sulking because his mission has been so remarkably successful! Man's innate selfishness prefers that things remain as they are, rather than share what we have with others. But woe to the Church when it would rather keep itself select than see the world at its doors converted. In an unenviable light, we see this Jonah standing aside waiting to see

if God will spare the Ninevites, unable to believe such a thing, angry at the very thought of it. While waiting in that mood it is God who asks him if he can have any justification for such inhumanness.

Not waiting for any answer, our author probes this despicable spirit of selfishness to its root cause in the incident of the gourd. A tree is made to come up with magical swiftness, which shelters Jonah from the sultry east wind and the burning rays of the sun. Then it vanishes again as quickly, destroyed by a worm; and Jonah is exposed to the hot blast and scorching heat; and he becomes violently angry at being subjected to such personal discomfort. What a pampered mortal to be so angry because of a momentary inconvenience! It is this man who is so precious about himself, who objects to other people having anything done for them. Heartlessness and self indulgence go together.

Then comes the final appeal. Jonah had set great store by that gourd, although he had not made it, but he valued it because of the protection it afforded. The Ninevites were God's own creation; and was He not justified in being kindy disposed toward those who were His own chidren, who had grown up under His fostering care, and who were meant to

play a great part in His purposes with the world? Can Jonah still find it in his heart to give them over to destruction, with their innocent children and harmless cattle? Just here the appeal breaks off suddenly, and the story comes to an abrupt end.

It is remarkable that a book of this character should have come out of the stony heart of Judaism; written by one who loved little children and dumb creatures, and who took all the world into his big heart. Regard the book as we may, it is a masterly portrayal of God's mercy struggling with bitter human prejudice.

VI.

HOW TO MAKE AN IDEAL WORLD.

Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with thy God.—MICAH vi. 8.

Every great cathedral is distinguished by some outstanding characteristic. And so is nearly every book of scripture. Take the book of Micah. There is no other book in the Bible about which there has been more discussion as to the date of certain parts of it. And scholars were inclined once to regard it as a heterogeneous collection of fragments. Its genuineness is now generally accepted by them, and as belonging to the latter part of the eighth century B.C. Parts of the book are still hard to understand, but that is owing to our lack of light and knowledge.

To study the writings of a man is to catch his spirit. There is much we do not know about this prophet, but he must have had great ethical insight and courage, a burning indignation at wrong, and a clear perception of the significance of what was happening around

him. He is stern in his denunciation of the sins of his time. And like the moral giant he was, he stands out as a man of independent thought and conviction. There was much to vex his righteous soul, and to kindle his indignation. The remarkable thing is that this man who lived two and a half millenniums ago uttered truths which the world would do well to heed to-day. How valuable to any nation are leaders of this stamp, compared with opportunists, time-servers, and men who play the game of politics for private ends.

Micah was not a townsman; he was not city-bred; but reared in the country. He is known as the prophet of the poor. He championed the cause of the agricultural labourer and smallholder. He would have fought for any great cause, for he was the enemy of tyranny and wrong. The village where he was born, because of its unique situation, may have had much to do in shaping his career. Moresheth-gath was in the extreme south-west of Judea, at the entrance of a famous valley where roads converged from many quarters. It was the Egyptian gateway into Judea; the great highway from Egypt to Jerusalem. The ambassadors which Isaiah tells us went down to Egypt from Hezekiah's court passed right by Micah's door. Lachish, the

extreme outpost of Judean territory, was twelve miles farther south from Moresheth across the plain. Living on that great main thoroughfare this prophet was in touch with the Jewish capital, and at the same time he was living on the border line which would bear the brunt of the Assyrian invasion; a catastrophe expected and dreaded. Situated as this village was in the midst of a beautiful and fertile country, the irregular chalk hills were separated by broad glens, and in the summer you had the waving cornfields and olive groves, the murmur of the bees, the singing of the lark, and shepherds and ploughmen calling to their flocks and to each other across the glens.

This prophet lived in days of great excitement and trouble. The constant suspense of invasion by a war-like nation like Assyria, must have been enough to try any nerves. Micah visualized the innocent people in the clustering villages nestling round about him being ground beneath the heel of a war-lord like Sargon. But the dread of invasion was not the only trouble. The misguided and inane politicians in Jerusalem were placing their country in the greatest jeopardy. Crying wrongs, corrupt practices, recklessness and immorality, were threatening to bring down upon the nation every conceivable disaster.

And what touched this prophet's soul most perhaps was the tyrannous absorption by the rich of the land of the poor. Wealthy plutocrats, hungry for land, dispossessed the small farmer. And reading between the lines we can see the pinched faces, bent backs, and broken lives of these poor victims of human greed and avarice.

All this was so monstrously wrong and sickening in this man's eyes that he could not believe that humanity was doomed to this state of thing; that this could be God's ideal for His world. And so he dreamed of an ideal world where there would be security from war and its horrible curse; and where injustice and oppression and greed and avarice would not be; but where the crippled and helpless would be succoured, and the outcast gathered in. Some such dream has haunted the imagination of man all down the ages; when all men will be bound together in the holy bonds of brotherhood, and all the nations will federate to promote the common good. And we refuse to believe that such an alluring prospect is a mere dream that will for ever elude our grasp.

Micah not only dreamed of an ideal world, but of an ideal Deliverer. He was one of the very first, if not the first, to focus the bones of Israel upon a Great Redeemer. And he

proclaimed the lowly origin of the Messiah. He would be born of the people, sharer of their toils and of their wrongs. What hope and comfort that would bring to the broken-hearted among the disinherited poor of his people!

This prophet distinguishes himself most, however, by his conception of an ideal programme for human conduct, expressed in words that have become immortal. To that ideal no subsequent century has been able to add anything either in grandeur or tenderness; and if only practised would bring about an ideal world. 'Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.' In this the most perfect creed ever formulated we see that religion and ethics are inseparable. We cannot have the one without the other. Divorce them and we get mere sentimentalism, or a type of religion that is void of compassion and charity. Too often so called religion or goodness is either all austerity, or it is unpardonably sloppy. Men will recoil from a religion that is more concerned with ritual than with justice and mercy; that ends in pharisaism and self interest; or in emotionalism and loose morality.

Religion does not consist in wearing vestments, assuming ecclesiastical prerogatives,

nor yet in singing revival hymns. The ritual of religion is only of value as it inspires right thoughts of God, and of duty to our fellow creatures. Sabbath services are not an end in themselves. A workman stops to take his dinner that he may be sustained physically to continue his day's work. He gets no wages for taking his meals. We wait upon God to renew our spiritual strength to carry out the designs of our Great Deliverer.

How comprehensive and far reaching is the programme that confronts us here! 'Do justly!' Be fair to every one. Give every man his due. Never take a mean advantage of another, or exploit a neighbour. Do not make gain at the cost of loss and suffering to others. Neither must we act treacherously to an opponent, or seek promotion by playing the sneak and detractor. We must not believe the tittle-tattle about another and jump to a hasty and unjust conclusion. What thought, care, tolerance, self-restraint, guardedness, it will require to be just to every one!

But being just is only one thing, we must 'love mercy.' We say revenge is sweet; but really it is devilish. How this injunction cuts right across our petty spite and jealousy and prejudice! A woman said once, 'My daughter is like I am, she bears malice. We can

forgive but we cannot forget. The cruel things done out of spite, or in self-defence! What a spectacle when members of a Church rend and tear each other! 'Love mercy,' avoid bitterheartedness.

'Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with thy God.' What a contrast to the ostentatious, oily, unctuous, goody-goodiness that repels and nauseates! 'Walk humbly with thy God.' The words suggest many things. They imply moral harmony between the soul and God; perfect understanding; mutual confidence; the intimacy of personal relationship, friendship, companionship and communion with God. And is not true religion a personal thing; something between our own soul and God? And the nearer we approach the Perfect One, the less we think of ourselves. God will not come to the self righteous heart, but He will dwell with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit.

'Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.' There is no greater saying in the Old Testament; and there is only one in the New Testament that excels it: 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'

VII.

THE NEMESIS OF WAR.

The Lord hath His way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of His feet.—NAHUM i. 3.

This prophet has few equals for purity of diction, boldness of imagery, and poetic fire. The rush and sweep of his language, its vividness and colouring; the sublimity of his thought, and its swift and dramatic effect, stamp him as one of the great masters of poetic speech. Possessed with a keen sense of right, and a great passion for humanity, the monstrous despotisms and tyrannies of his time so stirred his soul as to bring words from his lips like molten lava. All through his life and for many years before, Nineveh, the famous capital of Assyria, was the terror of Western Asia, as Napoleon was of Western Europe, only much more so, and for ten times as many years. We read of Nineveh as soon almost as we begin to read of anything in the Bible. It occurs as early as the tenth chapter of Genesis. In Nahum's day it had grown into

a vast city, was the dominant military power, and held the proudest position in the world. The Assyrians were the first great empire-builders, who also totally revolutionized the world's method of warfare. They reverenced nothing save brute force.

But there was a prophet courageous enough then to utter truths the nations would do well to take to heart to-day. The book of Nahum is a powerful poem on the doom of Nineveh. Here was a man who refused to believe that because an evil was deeply entrenched it must necessarily be tolerated. And his fearless prediction brought immense inspiration to the fainting hearts of his day. The prophet's name accords with his message: Nahum means, full of comfort. And he was a mighty comforter of the Lord's host. He went further than Isaiah, who said God would stand between His people and the Assyrians. This prophet declared with the emphasis of deep conviction that the day was coming when this menacing military power would be overthrown and brought to nought.

Quite naturally we may ask what ground he had for his belief and conviction. It is enough, perhaps, to say that he was a man of vision. He could see the white throne of God's justice casting down all human thrones

crimsoned with cruelty and crime. He may not have had the vision of a warless world, but he was sufficiently discerning to see that the policy of brute force ends in self destruction; and that war-like, war-loving nations must perish. Such a dictum may have marked a distinct advance in the thought of the world of his day. At any rate he firmly believed in the self-destructiveness of war.

And he also foresaw that sooner or later there would be a mighty conflict between Assyria and the combined forces of the Medes and the Babylonians. In a passage of amazing power he depicts the irresistible march of the destroying forces which will bring about the overthrow of Assyria; and with daring irony and banter he calls upon the men of Nineveh to mount guard on the ramparts, to watch well the roads leading to the capital, to strengthen their loins, and screw themselves up to the last ounce of strength and courage. And in the same breath he describes the assailants with their shields and scarlet tunics and war chariots flashing like torches, darting as lightning along the broadways leading to the capital; while the nobles, who are leading the attacking forces, speed on to the walls.

And what this prophet had predicted so

graphically and impressively, came to pass. Nineveh was besieged two years; and then a most unexpected thing happened. The Tigris overflowed with extraordinary force and carried away twenty furlongs of the great wall of the city. The army of the confederates then entered precipitately by the breach thus unexpectedly made, and completed the ruin of the city amid universal panic, anguish, and despairing flight. When the proud king of Assyria saw that all was lost, he withdrew to the palace, set fire to it, and perished with his women in the flames. In 606 B.C., Nineveh, one of the mightiest cities of the world, went under never to rise again. It has never even been partially rebuilt.

What Nahum believed and taught has been confirmed by subsequent history. Doom awaits any nation that measures its strength by its power of destructiveness, ruthlessly sacrifices human life, and fights like a wild beast for territory. 'All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.' It is becoming more and more evident to men that war belongs to the dark barbarous past, and is not only unchristian but a crime against humanity. In the name of human wretchedness a catastrophe like the last great war, involving the loss of nine million of lives, thirty million

casualties, and the spending of fifty thousand million sterling, must not be repeated. War not only impoverishes but demoralizes a nation.

Every great war is discovered afterwards to have been a colossal blunder. War may be a profession, but a profession that consists in human slaughter, has no right to exist. The theory that the best way to prevent war is to be prepared for it, has happily been exploded. Lord Grey's words, that to persist in piling up armaments would mean a Europe knee-deep in blood, have had a tragic fulfilment. We believe that a better way can be found for dealing with international disputants. The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man, make war unthinkable. One of the many tasks confronting the Christian Church is surely the abolition of war. Leadership and the moulding of public opinion must not be left solely to generals, admirals, and financiers. The great safeguard against war is not armed preparedness, but the awakened conscience of mankind. All great moral reforms have rested on a deep religious conviction in the heart of the people. Two paths are before us, and we cannot doubt on which of these two roads are to be found the foot prints of Christ.

VIII.

A SOUL'S TRIUMPHANT CONFLICT WITH DOUBT.

But the Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before Him.

—HABAKKUK ii. 20.

Very little is known of the prophet Habakkuk. His parentage, birthplace, and era are unrecorded. And yet his message, coming from the dim past, centuries before Christ, is as applicable for to-day as when first uttered. The wonder is that so small a contribution to the literature of the Bible should have had so great and far reaching an influence. Not only has the hymnology of christendom received the impress of his writings, but his great words (ii. 4) are cited in the New Testament as the bed-rock of Christian life. And it was this famous saying that brought light into the dark soul of Luther. He was doing penance in Rome by

ascending the Sancta Scala, when the words flashed in upon him like lightning from heaven, 'The just shall live by his faith.' At once he fled from the superstitious scene. Seven years later that Augustinian monk nailed to the gate of the church at Wittenberg the theses which introduced the Reformation. It was like a trumpet blast summoning all Europe to a moral resurrection. In a sense therefore we may regard Habakkuk as the father of Protestant freedom.

There is no other book, perhaps, that presents a greater contrast between the opening of it and its close, than the one bearing this prophet's name. The fact is that we have here a deep thinker who is tortured with doubt and misgiving. Few have touched deeper depths of soul agony. He went right up to the gates of blank despair. It has been said that he was the greatest pessimist who ever fought his way through to triumphant faith. That makes his verdict all the more valuable and convincing. He could not look at the world through rose-coloured glasses. He faced the stark-naked truth of things with all their contradiction and tragedy.

We can form some idea of the darkness of soul through which he passed from his opening words: 'O Lord, how long shall I cry,

and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out unto Thee of violence, and Thou wilt not save.' So many have been perplexed with this same apparent indifference on the part of God toward all the wrong-doing of the world. Some lost their faith during the great war, because there was no manifest divine interference. In our short sightedness we wonder sometimes why drastic measures are not adopted with evil doers. It was the seeming inactivity of God in face of earth's tragedies which so puzzled this prophet of long ago.

The first two chapters of the book of Habakkuk are in the form of a dialogue between God and the prophet. That dialogue gives us glimpses of the surging tumult in this man's soul; the intense struggle between light and darkness, despair and faith. You have the despondent cry of the prophet, and then you hear the voice of God saying, 'But I am at work always. I work a work in your days which ye will not believe though it be told you. I know also the might and hurry and rage and arrogance of the Chaldeans, that bitter impetuous nation which is threatening to sweep over the whole earth, seizing habitations, riding upon horses, swifter than leopards, fiercer than evening wolves. But nothing that this menacing world power can

do will defeat or frustrate My purpose. They are rather instruments in My hands to further its accomplishment.'

And so after much thought, hammered out amid stress and darkness, the prophet discovers that there are unseen moral forces at work in the world, combating the evil; forces destined to be victorious.

There are minds which must be convulsed with doubt before they can repose in faith. But this man was affronted by the arrogance and oppression of brutish men who used all their power to destroy. Why are they tolerated and permitted to cause such wholesale slaughter, and to inflict untold suffering upon others? To offer a satisfactory explanation may not be at all easy, but we cannot believe that God is the Father of evil. The wars of the world have been found to be colossal blunders on man's part. They were never ordained by God. And if we probe to the root cause of them, we find they were the outcome of man's jealousy and revenge. By no subtlety of human thought can we make God the author of human slaughter. And though we speak of Him as the God of Battles, it is only in the sense that He can and does override and overrule the wrath of man; and that the rage of man, however fierce and terrible, can

never wrest the world from His grasp or control. The passions of men will do their work of self-destruction; and wickedness will destroy the wicked as surely as righteousness will bring its own reward. And this prophet had visions of the time when evil would cease: 'For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.'

Habakkuk emerges from his fierce mental conflict with two deep convictions burnt into his soul (1) The ceaseless operation of God in His own world; (2) The self-destructiveness of wrong doing, culminating in the annihilation of evil. He has discovered that God is no absentee Deity, but one who is watchful of all the affairs of men and nations; with absolute control of all the forces that exist. 'The Lord is in His holy temple.' That is a sufficient guarantee that good must eventually triumph. Therefore we can be calm, confident, expectant, amid the clamour and tumult and bewildering confusion. 'The Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before Him';—silence inspired by absolute trust and deepest devotion. The stillness that comes of knowing what it means when the Lord is God. And so we are to learn quietly to wait.

It was the tremendous fact of the reality, nearness, and power of God that produced an utter change in the thought and outlook of this man. He had been tempted to think that God had left the world to chance, or to the devices of bloodthirsty men; but he recovered his belief in its divine government. His agitation gives place to a great peace; and instead of his despairing cry, we have expressions of triumphant assurance in a prayer-song of great sublimity. And like one whose eyes had been opened, he looks back and sees the hand of God in all the events of his nation's history from the days of the Exodus. A succession of sublime pictures of divine deliverance and interposition pass before his mental vision, until at last it seems to this poet-prophet as if all Nature was pulsating with the Divine Presence.

It is this faith alone that brings calm amid the cataclysms of earth. Renounce it and we have no more to cling to than the beasts of the field. All is dark, cruel, meaningless enigma; a maddening maze with no way out. Any social order that is not founded upon the belief in God, is founded on shifting sand. To run the world without God means unbridled ambition, seething discontent, moral disorder, and chaos. A godless creed does not

explain the grandeur of Nature; it cannot satisfy the heights and depths of human capacities; and it degrades man to the level of a fly crawling on the window pane. The man who says there is no God, puts all the lights out and plunges into darkness, with nothing before him but the desolation and silence of the tomb.

How different is everything to the man who believes in God! 'Though the fig tree shall not blossom, and there be no herd in the stalls,'—in spite of adversity and trouble, he has that which infinitely outweighs the losses, the misunderstandings, the smarts, the inequalities of life, because he has God. And to the man who is sure of God, a thousand streams of happiness gush forth to gladden him.

I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.

IX.

THE SEARCH-LIGHT OF GOD'S SCRUTINY.

I will search Jerusalem with candles.
—ZEPHANIAH i. 12.

The book of Zephaniah receives scant attention, and yet it contains messages of heart-searching power. There is good reason for thinking that it was written a little before 625 B.C., when the young king Josiah was endeavouring to carry out sundry religious reforms. The voice of prophecy had been long silent, and then two young prophets made themselves heard: Jeremiah and Zephaniah. The former speaks of himself as being only a youth, and the latter was hardly out of his teens. The youthfulness of Zephaniah is evinced by the drastic tone of his prophecy, his indignation, and unsparing ardour. Youth is less tolerant than age. He was probably of royal descent, and his home was

in Jerusalem. Zephaniah means, Jehovah hath hidden, and suggests that he was born in the 'killing time' of the cruel Manasseh.

The keynote of this book is Judgement: 'I will sweep, sweep from the face of the ground. The fire of My fury shall consume the whole earth.' No hotter invectives, or severer denunciations of sin and wickedness, are to be found in the whole of the Old Testament.

What was it that so deeply stirred the soul of this young prophet? There were two things. First he sees looming in the distance black war clouds which portend a war of almost unparalleled magnitude bringing with it vast destruction upon the earth and incurring immense slaughter. Then he sees how morally rotten the nations have become, his own among them. And to him this dreaded yet inevitable nameless terror which is soon to overtake them, is a judgement. He sees it all coming; this day of the Lord's anger when the Almighty will make a clean sweep. Presumably it is the only way of ridding the earth of the moral rottenness. Hence there is little hope in this book; hardly any tenderness; not a single metaphor drawn from the loveliness and peace of Nature.

It may be difficult for us to understand

what heart-breaking days those were for reformer and prophet. We hear Jeremiah saying, 'Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!' With the Ten Tribes already in captivity, the ruin and dispersion of Judah seemed well within sight. Zephaniah therefore had no faith in the reforms the young king was trying to effect. The situation was too desperate, and the cancerous growth had gone too deep. To him the one thing that was all important was this day of doom. If it cannot be averted how should it be met?

There was abundant proof afterwards that this prophet was no mere alarmist or deluded visionary. Within forty years of the utterance of his burning words of warning the threatened calamity fell upon them with shattering and desolating severity. Nineveh was wiped out; Jerusalem reduced to a heap of ruins. Zephaniah was probably in his grave by then; for it is believed that he died young. But during his lifetime his words failed to rouse the people. They were persuaded that God would neither do good nor evil. They could not conceive a Deity who concerned Himself with crusades for freedom and purity and sobriety; and therefore the

reforms Josiah and his party were attempting would be useless. And they could not believe in a God who would be revengeful and spiteful; therefore all this talk of judgement was simply so much hot air. And so believing in a God who was more or less indifferent and indulgent, they took their ease, and enjoyed the good things that came their way. Why not? What does it matter whether this great beast of a world has its hair licked one way or the other? Why be distressed about the world's morals?

Mazzini encountered this very temper in the second stage of his career. Many of those who had eagerly dreamt of a free Italy fell away when the first revolt failed. In all ages prophet and reformer have been up against the criminal apathy of the respectable, well-to-do classes, sunk in ease and indifference to moral issues. We need never fear the hot assaults of the Evil One, nor yet the violent and anarchical, in the great war for human progress. It is the impenetrable and unconquerable inertia of self-satisfied, ease-loving, pleasure-seeking individuals who have settled down into smug contentedness, and who no longer believe that the abyss between good and evil is anything like so very deep after all. The men and women with no aim, no

mission in life beyond their own enjoyment, who are deaf to every call, and callous to the wrongs and undoneness of the world.

It would really seem that when some people prosper, they inevitably relax moral restraint, become unknowingly indifferent to holy causes, lose their vision and ideals, and surrender themselves to the spirit of the world. And bereft to a large extent of lofty principles and generous impulses, they constitute the greatest hindrance to every great forward movement.

In this book of prophecy the people against whom the sentence of doom is pronounced are not sunken creatures in the dregs of society, but the enlightened and privileged, who are lacking in moral fibre, and whose life is stale, insipid, soulless, convictionless. It is these who are held most culpable for the condition of their country. It is concerning these that God says, 'I will search Jerusalem with candles; and I will punish the men that are settled on their lees, that say in their heart, the Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil.'

We can visualize the cramped, narrow, crooked, winding streets of a city like Jerusalem, and the difficulty of discovering the whereabouts of evildoers who lurk in the deep

shadows of its gloomy passages, unless diligent and determined search is made by one who as he searches peers with his light into every dark corner and secret hiding place. So with those who 'came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty,'—they will not escape. They will be brought to judgement by the Divine Searcher however cunningly they may have tried to elude and evade Him.

Do we forget the awful eyes of Him who sifts our every action, is acquainted with all our ways, and knows the inmost recesses of the human heart? We may shirk duty by slinking into the shadows, or we may try to lose ourselves in the crowd, but we cannot escape the search-light of God's scrutiny. We shall be followed and judged each of us for our personal attitude to the great movements of our time. We are not alive for our own pleasure. We can vegetate in bemused complacency but our rightful place is in God's Great Crusade. And to live below the highest that is possible, is to live unworthily. 'To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.'

If this ardent young prophet with his austere gospel, living in a shameless age of moral laxity and excess, could speak to us

to-day, it would be to call us as a people to a more earnest, serious, and disciplined life. Mere reforms for social amelioration and material betterment are not enough to save any nation from the downward trend. There must be deep-contrition, the simple trust of the penitent heart, character grounded upon godliness. What must be more jealously guarded than anything else, is the soul of the people; because the break-up of a nation always begins from within.

X.

THE HIDDEN GREATNESS OF WORK DONE FOR GOD.

The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, saith the Lord of hosts.

—Haggai ii. 9.

After seventy years of Babylonish captivity a king came to the throne of Assyria in the person of Cyrus, who issued a proclamation that the Jewish exiles might return to their own country. Whether political strategy prompted the famous edict or not, he was willing not only to release them, but to assist in their return, and in the rebuilding of the ruined temple at Jerusalem. The vast majority, however, did not avail themselves of this offer of freedom. Ties had been formed which they could not easily sunder. Or it may be they were fascinated by the gaiety and grandeur of a city like Babylon. It meant something to abandon its thronged streets, its

gardens, and fine buildings, and the busy river lined with quays and storehouses, and betake themselves to unknown perils for a city in ruins, and a country lying waste and desolate. Well-fed exile seemed preferable. It is like pleasure-loving human nature to choose exile from God, rather than return to the home and heart of the Great Father.

Over forty thousand of them, however, did accept the offer. The love of fatherland had not been deadened by long captivity. They formed the first contingent to return. It meant a long journey of eight hundred miles, and it took four months. They were provided with a military escort of one thousand horse soldiers. And they brought back with them over five thousand of the sacred vessels which had been carried into Babylon. But what a dismal, dreary, prospect confronted them upon their arrival! What had been the Holy City and Solomon's temple were heaps of ruins blackened by fire. And yet they felt they were on holy ground, standing where David and Solomon had stood. And they began to dream dreams and to see visions. They even commenced to lay the foundations of the temple.

Then something happened that arrested the work and held it up for fifteen years. Cyrus

died, and he was followed by Ahasuerus, otherwise known as Cambyses, who was eccentric to madness, and eventually committed suicide. Artaxerxes succeeded him, and he was assassinated seven months later. Both monarchs forbade the rebuilding of the temple. But with the death of Artaxerxes the way opens once more. A great change, however, had come over these returned exiles during those stagnant years. All their enthusiasm had died down, and humanly speaking that temple would never have been built had it not been for Haggai. A sublime optimist himself, he had been raised up to inspire them. The secret of his great faith was his magnificent conception of Jehovah. His God is always, the Lord of hosts.

This prophet was confronted with a formidable task. The people were unwilling, unimaginative, self-centred, sceptical. To the old men it was a changed world with much of its glory departed. What glory could any other temple have that was comparable to Solomon's temple? They could not share the faith Haggai had that out of those beast-haunted ruins, a city and a temple would arise. And yet the prophet felt that the ends of the earth depended upon that temple being rebuilt. They bring forward every conceiv-

able excuse for not doing anything. They cite the rising prices of timber and other things. Bushels of excuses can be found if we do not want to do a thing, but if we have set our hearts upon it, we become blind to difficulties, discouragements, and impossibilities. Haggai reproves, entreats, flings before their vision every imaginable incentive. They plead poverty, but he points reprovingly to their elaborately decorated houses, their costly luxurious dwellings, whilst the temple of God lay in ruins. They complain of poor harvests, scanty wages, inability to save, but they forget that the poverty most to be dreaded is the poverty of the soul. The time is inopportune! It always is to the unwilling.

Haggai explains away every difficulty they bring forward. The money will be forthcoming; they need have no fear. Had not God said, 'The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine.' If they will begin God will be with them; He is with all who are doing His work. The prophet reminds them that world convulsions and upheavals cannot hinder, they contribute to the fulfilment of the divine purpose. It is God who shakes the nations, and always for the accomplishment of great ends. But they still have one subtle plea: Could they not be just as religious without a temple?

Human nature is the same in all ages. A religion that called for no effort, trouble, expense, sacrifice of any kind, would have many devotees.

Strange that these people were so reluctant to do the work for which God had set them free. How little they grasped its importance: that they were to prepare a nation from which the Messiah of the world would spring. What greater work is there than that of bringing God into the life of the people; helping to prepare the world for His great millennium?

How this prophet strove to open their eyes to the surpassing grandeur and greatness of the work they were to do. With sublime courage and faith he says, 'The glory of this latter house shall be greater than the former.' He did not mean that the splendour of the fabric would outrival that of Solomon's temple. Zerubbabel's temple, like all temples made with hands, suffered decay. It did not last until our Lord's time. He is thinking of what that temple will stand for in the life of the people—what it betokened, anticipated—that it was part of a great whole which is ever nearing fruition; that there is a far off divine event toward which the whole creation moves. Haggai believed that the building of that temple would mark a great spiritual

advance toward that glorious consummation when the King of kings would come to His earthly temple. What he taught was that the best has yet to be; that they had a great future before them as a nation.

His words did not fall to the ground. Within four years the temple was completed, and opened 515 B.C.

We may be asking to-day with a sickening sense of failure, What is the good of it all? We may be discouraged, disillusioned, ready to give up. But suppose you stop! Suppose we all stopped! and surrendered all our ennobling conceptions of human conduct as so many airy nothings; renounced the poetry and sacredness of human life; erased from the relationships of life all the restraints and obligations and claims and sanctities and imperatives of religion; and closed our Sunday schools and churches and used them as cigarette factories and whisky distilleries; that we blotted the idea of God from the mind of every child; and carved nothing on gravestones but the name and date of birth and death; and taught that this planet spins automatically by its own momentum; and where are you? All that makes life sacred and divine, has gone. You have opened the floodgates to political and commercial corruption;

to social, industrial and domestic anarchy; and given free scope to greed, hatred, lust, ignorance and injustice. You have relinguished all that exalts a nation, that makes for the uplift of the world.

Nothing is comparable to the building up of the spiritual temple of God among men; the moral and spiritual elevation of the race. And life resolves itself into either being willing to help in rebuilding the ruins of a desolated world, or in giving oneself up to the pleasures of sin for a season. We can either be obsessed with the superficial, subsidiary affairs of life, or respond to the higher calls.

If a heartlessness has crept into our prayers; if there is an atmosphere of unreality in our worship; if all the life and glow and rapture has gone out of our religion; if the hallowed shrine at the centre of our life has been profaned, secularized, our first work is to reconstruct the inner sanctuary of our soul. The heart within can be a temple, or a den of unclean things.

The temple of my heart,
O make it Thine.

XI.

SUCCESS IN THE GUISE OF FAILURE.

Thy King cometh unto thee; lowly and riding upon an ass, even upon a colt the foal of an ass.—ZECHARIAH ix. 9.

The book of Zechariah is the longest of the twelve Minor Prophets. Its alleged composite authorship does not detract from its value, and should not blind us to the preciousness of the gold to be found within its pages. The first eight chapters are so unlike the three which immediately follow, that the same person, it is contended, could not possibly have written both. And the last three chapters of the book are so different again from the eleven which precede them, that it is thought their authorship must also have been distinct.

We welcome any new light that helps us to a better understanding of the Scriptures, and the devout investigations of scholarly men are bound to claim our thoughtful consideration. The author of the first eight chapters puts his message into a series of allegories which he is

supposed to have dreamt; very much on the lines of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. And they would be as intelligible in that age, as a political cartoon is to us. The three chapters at the end of this book of prophecy are regarded by some competent critics as a collection of literary fragments of different authorship.

It will be enough for our present purpose to confine our attention to Chapters ix. x. and xi. No one questions that these three chapters were written by the same person; and the traditional view is that they were written by a man bearing the name of Zechariah, who lived in the eighth century B.C., when there was a veritable constellation of prophetical writers. A contemporary with Isaiah in Jerusalem, he has recorded in these three chapters his experience in this strange life of unfulfilled purposes and desires. Judging from what he has written, he was a sanguine and impulsive man, born to be the leader of a forlorn hope.

We are told that as a writer his style is not as distinguished as others of his own time; that he lacks the finished grace of Joel; the sustained loftiness of Amos; the quick fancy and thrilling pathos of Hosea; and the splendour, wealth and fulness of Isaiah. But he

has poetic fire, generous sensibility, and trenchant energy, entitling him to rank with the other poet-orators of his day. He is not an ethical teacher so much as a patriot. He adds nothing to the doctrine of God, or to the theology of the Old Testament. He lacks the moral breadth and force of Amos, and the religious inwardness and depth of Hosea. But as a patriot he is distinguished and great. He has an intense belief in a coming Messiah —a Messiah as a distinct person of well marked character and attributes. He holds most tenaciously the belief of the imperishableness of Jehovah's visible kingdom amongst men. And his portraiture in Chapter ix. of the Perfect King, is his outstanding and original contribution.

Cherishing the belief he did, he was deeply distressed that God's people should be divided into two kingdoms. And the Ten Tribes in the North were not only cut off from the southern kingdom, but they were rent by the fierce strife of their rulers. If only the people of Israel could see what he had seen! If all her tribes could understand the blessings in store for them! His soul was on fire with the glorious vision of a mighty king who was coming one day to reign in Zion. And so he makes an heroic effort and undertakes a mission to

the kingdom of Israel, and for fifteen years preaches his gospel of the blessedness of an united people to greet the coming king.

At first they were inclined to listen to his dreams; they were rather taken with him. But soon they became indifferent; and then their indifference changed into ridicule. And as far as the immediate object of his ministry, he was an ignominious failure. His labours and shepherd-like devotion were all wasted. His heaven-inspired programme is laughed to scorn. He must have complained at such requital for his pains; and in jest they gave him a present of thirty pieces of silver—the legal price paid for injury to a slave. They wanted to get rid of him, and this was their subtle way of expressing their contempt. Resenting their treatment of him, he casts the money into the treasury, tells them that they will discover their folly when it is too late, shakes the dust of Samaria from his feet, and returns to Judea a defeated and sorrowful man. The eventide of his life was probably a clouded one, for within fifteen years of his withdrawal, Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians, and the nation of the Ten Tribes was effaced from the records of history.

This prophet may be counted among the failures, and yet conspicuous honour was paid

to him long years after he had been laid to rest. He had proclaimed the coming of the King in lowly guise, 'riding upon an ass, even upon a colt the foal of an ass' to indicate how unlike He would be to the kings of earth who depend upon brute force. Long ages belied that prophecy, but after seven hundred and seventy years it was fulfilled to the letter; for Jesus chose to proclaim Himself the Christ in the precise manner foretold by this prophet; as if to honour the man who had been so ill-requited ages before.

And there was yet another way in which he was honoured. The bribe given to Judas Iscariot for betraying Jesus was thirty pieces of silver. As if that was all they thought He was worth. The legal price of a slave's life. The remorseful traitor flung that bribe afterwards on to the temple floor. And the evangelist in recording this reminds his readers that it was at the same rate of value that they valued one of the prophets of old. The fact that St. Matthew quotes as Jeremiah's a saying which should be ascribed to Zechariah, shows perhaps that the writer was too much occupied with the sense of scripture to be anxiously careful about the heading of its books. Or possibly the scarcity of books, and the difficulty of handling them, made such

details a matter of memory rather than exact reference, in ancient times. We find St. Mark (chap. i. verses 2, 3) ascribing to Isaiah a quotation, the first part of which comes from Malachi. But what concerns us is that this noble prophet Zechariah became a mournful type of the Great Shepherd of the sheep, to whom the Jewish people at first listened gladly, and then afterwards cried, 'Away with Him.'

These two coincidences link this prophet very closely to our Lord and his, as if to teach us something of the nature and glory of failure. We all fail sometimes. It is recorded even of Jesus, 'And He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.' The right conditions, the necessary atmosphere, were lacking. And you feel what an infinite loss it was to those people that such was the case.

> In this dim world of clouding cares,
> We rarely know, till 'wildered eyes
> See white wings lessening up the skies,
> The angels with us unawares.

But what of those who vanish from our sight without having effected that for which they strove so heroically; who laid down their lives it would almost seem in vain. Are they to be forgotten? Are they without honour or re-

ward? Does not the story of Zechariah teach that honest failure, like real worth, has its own reward. It will not come all at once. Franz Hals had been dead two hundred years before the world was made to understand the greatness of his genius. William III remained for more than one hundred and forty years in his grave before Macaulay's eloquence made him shine with his full lustre in the immortalizing pages of history.

And the men who have nobly failed in the service of God while striving for lofty ideals, have a greatness and glory all their own. Theirs is the high failure that overleaps the bounds of low success. And what they deemed failure was not failure but glorious martyrdom to the call of duty and the higher impulse of the soul. And as surely as He who was hounded out of the world has since captured the world's homage; so these faithful ones who have lost all in the conflict, with nothing to show for all their soul anguish and travail, will shine as the stars for ever and ever.

XII.

THE FLOOD-TIDE OF BLESSING AND HOW TO PROCURE IT.

Prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven.—MALACHI iii. 10.

It is a disputed point among scholars whether Malachi was actually the last of the Old Testament prophets before the marvellous dawn. Interesting as the question is, it need not detain us now. We know that this courageous standard bearer of righteousness of the fifth century B.C. lived in a time of moral and spiritual slackness. The seventy years of Babylonish captivity was at an end, but the return of the exiles to Jerusalem was not followed by the Golden Age. Zerubbabel had rebuilt the temple, and Nehemiah had nearly completed the rebuilding of the walls and fortifications.

But it was a bitter disillusionment for the

people who had returned to the Fatherland to discover that they were exposed to the scorn and violence and robbery of Samaritans and Ammonites. Armed bands of marauders would sweep away their harvests. Then there were times when the seed sown was washed out of the ground by unseasonable rains, or rendered useless by parching droughts. Disaster seemed to stare them in the face. The poorest of them had to listen to their children crying for bread, the little lips blue with famine.

But poverty was only one of the distressing factors. The moral sense seemed to be blurred and blunted in these people, and there was unsettlement of religious belief. It may be that the captivity was largely responsible for this. In Babylon they had mingled with those of other religions and habits. They had seen and heard much that suggested new trains of thought, and that led them to look with more critical eyes upon what before they had taken for granted.

It is a commendable thing to dig down to the living rock, and to rest upon nothing but what is immovable. Yet that can be carried too far, until we are so infatuated with our own sceptical mind that we end by becoming worshippers of our own supposed cleverness.

To refuse to accept anything until we are satisfied about everything, is to get hopelessly adrift. And we cannot read the pages of Malachi without seeing that it is only a step from scepticism to cynicism. They question if there was any profit or virtue in serving God. Religion they regarded as a pose; and the unwarrantable assumption to be the favourites of heaven, was by no means a guarantee of genuineness. Just as sullen spirits to-day regard the churches as institutions for fostering class distinctions, and proclaim virtue to be a myth.

The tone and mood of the people of Malachi's time revealed itself in disheartenment and indifference to religion. In such an atmosphere he sought to recall his fellow countrymen to a true sense of moral and spiritual values. Very courageously he begins by attacking the religious and spiritual leaders on the grounds of their mercenariness and hireling spirit. They will not close a door or light a fire on a holy altar without pay. And like priest, like people. They send animals for sacrifice to the temple which they would not dare send to market: blind, lame, wretched carcases of beasts that were a disgrace to the temple courts. The priests performed their office for the sake of the pay attached to it,

but the whole thing was boredom to them. While the service offered by the people was cheap and heartless.

A third scandal indignantly denounced by this prophet was the number of groundless divorces that were taking place. Nehemiah had instituted a divorce court to meet the problem of mixed marriages, and they took advantage of that to divorce their own wives that they might marry foreign women. He unmasks the treachery and baseness of such offenders. It is the most outspoken condemnation of divorce in the Old Testament.

It is significant that all these prophets attribute degeneracy in the tone and life of the people to moral drift, and the one remedy prescribed is getting back to God. If a nation forsakes the sanctuary for the swine trough, cheap remedies, short cuts, petty reforms, party measures, will not meet the case. And it is incontestable that an irreligious age is aways an immoral age. An irreligious spirit is the precursor of the dissolution of those sacred ties which hold society together.

Malachi makes clear the three essentials in human life for which religion stands. In pointing out these three main principles he goes down to the bed rock of things. One is, Man's duty to his fellow man. This prophet

asks, 'Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Then why deal treacherously every man against his brother?' Here is a man insisting upon an elementary religious truth, that one is our Father, even God; whether we are rich or poor, learned or ignorant, employer or employee.

The recognition of that truth is the greatest unifying force there is, and puts our duty to our fellow man in an unmistakable light. As long as we ignore this truth there is little check upon human selfishness. But the revival, not of priestcraft, but of this religious instinct would solve all our problems. The religion that sees in every man a brother; that fills men's hearts with goodwill and compassion for their fellows; that spirit and temper would change our earthly nature into the likeness and image of God. Would anything be impossible to a nation composed of such men?

But religion means something more. It is discharging the duty we owe to God. This prophet would say that it is as possible to cheat God as to cheat our neighbour. Perhaps that is not as apparent to the modern mind. We suffer to-day from the lost consciousness of the divine claims. What has God to do with me? What have I to do with God? What

claims can God have upon me? In what have I robbed God? It is not until we begin to think that we discover that we do owe something to God. We are not so self-sufficient as to owe nothing to any one but ourselves. We have not made ourselves. We do not run this universe, or arrange the order of the seasons with such unvarying regularity. There is surely some Power or Being claiming our homage and adoration. We cannot be so blind and insensible as not to be moved to worship,

> Mid all this mighty sum of things for ever speaking.

Is it not reasonable to think that some blessing does come into a man's soul and life as the result of dutiful homage to his Creator; that because we worship a benevolent God, and not an impassive Sphinx, man's devotion will be reciprocated by the Divine? Must not God discriminate between those who lovingly obey Him, and those who reject and rebel against His sovereignty? Malachi's answer is emphatic that if we will but put God to the test by doing our part, bringing our tribute of love and gratitude, the reward will be without stint or measure; and that it is the God honouring people who know the flood tide of blessing.

But true religion has its culmination in the

production of transparency and blamelessness of character. Malachi confirms the expectation of his countrymen of a Messiah, but how different will that Messiah be from what they anticipate! The Lord whom they seek will come, but as a Refiner! 'And who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth? for He is like a refiner's fire: and He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.' Pure religion and undefiled implies the elimination of all self seeking, and the love of virtue for its own sake.

The closing words of this book are for the encouragement of the faithful. They are told that before Him lies a record of His worshippers who adhere to Him. That God will claim them as His own prized possessions, His jewels, on the day when He takes action. 'The day cometh, it burneth as a furnace, but unto you that fear My name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.' For them that day will not be a day of terror, but of healing gladness.

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